France cuts its 'big science' spend to bolster lab research

Paris

French research agencies have been told by research minister Claude Allègre to cut FF200 million (US\$31 million) from their budgets for large scientific facilities, to provide extra money for laboratory research.

The national space agency, CNES, which accounts for half of the spending on large programmes, will absorb half of the cuts. To achieve this, the agency will put on hold plans to launch Corot, a space telescope designed to study the seismology of stars and look for extrasolar planets, in 2003.

The Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and the atomic energy commission, CEA, will share the remaining FF100 million in cuts.

At the CEA, the cuts will affect France's contribution to two particle detectors for the Large Hadron Collider at the European Laboratory for Particle Physics (CERN), in Geneva, Switzerland, and the heavy-ion accelerator at Ganil in Caen.

France's contribution to two satellites planned by the European Space Agency — First, which observes primordial galaxies, and Integral, which studies stellar explosions — will also be affected. The research minister, a long-standing critic of manned space flight, has also said he will cut back on France's contribution to the International Space Station.

On arriving in office two years ago, Allègre announced his intention to cut the

budget for large equipment, which accounts for FF4.6 billion this year and FF4.8 billion next year.

Even though the 8.4 per cent of France's research budget spent on large equipment is no more than that spent in the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States, Allègre considers the spending of these countries excessive.

According to ministry figures, spending on big science has grown by 69 per cent over the past ten years. In contrast, general financial stringency has meant that spending on research projects has increased by 34 per cent over this period, while the overall research budget was up by only 22 per cent.

Allègre's bid to reduce spending on large equipment has prompted him to seek international cooperation for future projects. One result has been the controversial decision in August to join up with British plans to build a new synchrotron, rather than construct a French machine (see page 451 in this issue and *Nature* 400, 489; 1999).

While many researchers applaud Allègre's commitment to laboratory spending, not all are pleased with seeing the money drained from big-science facilities.

"It's true that the CNRS labs are poor," says Edouard Brezin, president of the board of the CNRS. "But these cuts are going to make it pretty difficult to run the machines that we are using. We don't know right now how to resolve this."

Heather McCabe

Kalam: unprecedented role for science adviser.

Champion of India's bomb rewarded with cabinet position

New Delhi

A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, a pioneer in India's rocket and missile programme who was largely responsible for the country's nuclear tests last year (see *Nature* 393, 197–198; 1998), has been appointed principal science adviser to the government. He will be the first working scientist to achieve cabinet rank.

Kalam is currently scientific adviser to the defence minister and chief of the Defence Research Development Organization, which is responsible for about 40 labs. He will now oversee much of India's scientific activity — including atomic energy and space — and advise the government on all aspects of science policy.

Officials in the office of prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee say that the move, announced last week, is the first step towards restructuring and coordinating India's scientific agencies (known as departments), which have been growing increasingly independent, to ensure they address national priorities.

Kalam is expected to break down barriers among departments and ministries and build synergy into the scientific system. His cabinet rank is intended to help him achieve this.

Scientists have mostly welcomed the appointment. "If the idea of having a principal science adviser is to bring cohesiveness, it is a good move because Kalam can do it," says Ragunath Mashelkar, secretary of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research.

But Kalam's cabinet rank is expected to create some confusion. Vajpayee's council of ministers already has two science ministers — one being Murli Manohar Joshi, a former physicist. Kalam's new status has also made the job of the junior science minister, Bachi Singh Rawat, redundant.

K. S. Jayaraman

EMBL pay settlement will cost millions

Munich

A long-running labour dispute at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) in Heidelberg, Germany, was settled last week at a cost of at least DM4 million (US\$2 million) to the organization's 16 member states.

EMBL's council agreed to implement a judgement of the Geneva-based International Labour Organization (ILO), which had ruled that the lab was wrong to abandon in the mid-1990s its adherence to the salary recommendations of the Coordinated Organizations, a committee that sets salary scales for international organizations (see *Nature* 375, 442; 1995).

It remains unclear how seriously this compliance will affect EMBL. The council has asked for clarification of whether the ruling refers simply to the salary adjustment from 1995 — which would cost 2.1 per cent

of the laboratory's budget in back pay and DM0.8 million per annum in future — or also to a backdated implementation of higher salary scales. This second option would cost considerably more — namely 8 per cent of the budget in back pay and DM3.5 million per annum.

Member states have agreed to find the money to support the first but not the second scenario, which would have to be financed from within the existing budget. Final decisions will be confirmed at a council meeting in March.

The settlement comes at a time when EMBL already faces the withdrawal of European Commission support for its outstation, the European Bioinformatics Institute (see page 450), and is expecting to seek from member states a substantial increase in its basic budget for its next five-year indicative scheme, beginning in 2001.

Alison Abbott